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**Absence as Presence:  
An Analysis of Schumann's "Im wunderschönen Monat Mai"**

Composed in 1840, Robert Schumann's *Dichterliebe* (Opus 48) sets selected poems from Heinrich Heine's *Lyrisches Intermezzo*. The first piece, "Im wunderschönen Monat Mai," establishes an emotional framework for the entire cycle — the exploration of love's absence. The narrator, who speaks in the first person from the present moment, recounts a past romantic experience (see

Example 1):

Im wunderschönen Monat Mai,  
Als alle Knospen sprangen,  
Da ist in meinem Herzen  
Die Liebe aufgegangen.

In the wonderfully beautiful month of May,  
When all the buds were bursting,  
Then it was in my heart (that)  
Love rose up.

Im wunderschönen Monat Mai,  
Als alle Vögel sangen,  
Da hab ich ihr gestanden  
Mein Sehnen und Verlangen.

In the wonderfully beautiful month of May,  
When all the birds sang,  
Then I confessed to her  
My yearning and my desire.

**Example 1. Heinrich Heine, "Im wunderschönen Monat Mai," Translation.**

I think that Schumann's setting of Heine's poetry reinforces certain aspects of the text, but ultimately alters and adds upon Heine's content. While Heine's poem has a repetitive quality — expressed through meter, rhythm, and structure — Schumann's setting is reiterative.<sup>1</sup> The composer uses repeated motives, harmony, and melody to create a fragmented, circular structure that is ultimately more painful than the poem's initial meaning. Schumann suggests, through tonal ambiguity and a latent key area, the complete absence of the narrator's love. I do not feel that this

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<sup>1</sup> I am using the definitions of "repetitive" and "reiteration" that we received in class. Repetition

absence is explicit in the poem itself. The aim of this paper is to explore the way in which Schumann’s setting subtly expresses Heine’s text while also creating this additional layer of meaning.

The poem, in two quatrains, is in iambic tetrameter (see Example 2).<sup>2</sup> In quatrain #1, the first line establishes a rhythmic expectation of four complete feet per line; line 1 ends on the stressed syllable “Mai.” However, the second line is incomplete. The final stressed syllable is not spoken, but rather is implied through a pause.<sup>3</sup> One might then expect the meter of lines 1 and 2 to repeat for lines 3 and 4, with four complete feet in line 3 and 3 ½ feet in line 4. This strikes me as a very familiar rhyme scheme; the regularity of the verse would create a balance and wholeness to the poem’s rhythmic structure. Heine instead opts for lines 3 and 4 to *also* be incomplete, with implied pauses after the unstressed syllables. The fact that the rhythm is iambic is not uncommon given the language; however, it means that the pause is always on a stressed syllable, giving extra weight to the silence.

Quatrain #1:		End rhyme:
	Line 1 Im <b>wunderschönen</b> <b>Monat</b> <b>Mai</b> ,	a
	Line 2 Als <b>alle</b> <b>Knospen</b> <i>sprangen</i> , /	b
	Line 3 Da <b>ist</b> in <b>meinem</b> <i>Herzen</i> /	x
	Line 4 Die <b>Liebe</b> <i>aufgegangen</i> . /	b
Quatrain #2:		
	Line 5 Im <b>wunderschönen</b> <b>Monat</b> <b>Mai</b> ,	a
	Line 6 Als <b>alle</b> <b>Vögel</b> <i>sangen</i> , /	b
	Line 7 Da <b>hab</b> ich <b>ihr</b> <i>gestanden</i> /	x
	Line 8 Mein <b>Sehnen</b> <b>und</b> <i>Verlangen</i> . /	b

**Example 2. Heinrich Heine, “Im wunderschönen Monat Mai,”  
Analysis of Structure, Meter, and Rhyme.**

<sup>2</sup> In Example 2, I have indicated stressed syllables through **bold** font with the most stressed syllable in *italics*. All syllables in regular font are unstressed.

<sup>3</sup> In Example 2, I have inserted “/” where I feel this pause to exist naturally in the poem’s rhythm.

The extreme asymmetry of the meter evokes an imbalance and incompleteness that the reader feels, and wishes to be rectified. Quatrain #2 repeats the same pattern. This repetition adds significance as the reader yearns for conclusion, but still does not receive it. This technique affirms Meyer's theory in music, which certainly also applies to poetry: "...music arouses expectations, some conscious and others unconscious, which may or may not be directly and immediately satisfied" (Meyer 25). Meyer would further argue that the delay in gratification is what creates the strongest emotional reaction.

Both quatrains utilize the same rhyme scheme: a-b-x-b. As opposed to an English or Italian sonnet structure, which has a built-in conclusion, this folk-like rhyme scheme creates a sense of continuum. Rather than this poem existing as a complete idea, the rhyme scheme implies a dropping-in, as if the poem existed before it began and will continue on after we speak it. This concept parallels Romantic ideals of utilizing folk art as inspiration for "high-class" art. The continuous quality evoked connects the reader to a higher Source, perhaps eternity. It also further evokes the yearning inherent in the text's meaning.

Both quatrains contain the same meter and rhyme scheme, and also imply a parallel structure. The introductory lines of each quatrain, lines 1 and 5, amplify this parallel structure. They are exact reiterations. Both quatrains also share a grammatical framework. The question then becomes — even as Heine creates many connections between the two quatrains in terms of poetic organization, how do they differ? I believe that the main difference, while obvious, is the subject matter.

The personal experience of the narrator is extremely different in the first stanza versus the second (see Example 1). The narrator uses images from the natural world to evoke these contrasting moments. In the first stanza, the narrator compares the blooming flowers in May to the love that powerfully emerged in his heart. In the second stanza, the singing birds in May are used to represent the vocalization of his love — the outward expression of his longing and his desire. In the first stanza, the narrator has an internal experience, and in the second, an external experience. A blooming flower is a much quieter image than a singing bird. The contrast is in fact shocking, and there is nothing circular about this aspect of the poem.

Heine is concerned with the narrator's inner psychology, a psychology that I believe develops over the course of the poem. His inner desire must ultimately burst open and be expressed. The pauses where stressed syllables are absent could then be interpreted as an upward moving of breath, an inner excitement that can no longer be contained. For me, Heine's poem creates a trajectory from INSIDE → OUTSIDE. What is not clear from Heine's poem is how the object of his desire responds. Did she reciprocate his love, or did she reject him? For Heine's purposes, I don't think it matters. Heine is concerned only for the experience of the narrator.

In contrast, Schumann's interpretation of the poem is very interested in how the lover responds. The entire setting centers on a depiction of love's absence. This is not the absence that Heine depicts — a yearning for one's lover — but rather a permanent absence — a love that no longer exists, and hasn't for a while. Schumann implies through his musical setting that the woman is no longer in the narrator's

life. It is not clear to me whether the woman is absent through rejection, distance, or death; but the permanent absence is what Schumann cares most to evoke.

Before exploring how Schumann creates an additional meaning within Heine's poem, I would like to briefly touch upon ways that Schumann's setting does express Heine's intent. Schumann is interested in expressing the yearning, longing, and desire that the narrator expresses. These emotional states suggest a distance between the narrator and his love. As discussed previously, Heine depicts this distance through incomplete 4-foot iambic tetrameter in the final three lines of each quatrain. Schumann further emphasizes this distance through the accompaniment, which includes plentiful non-chord tones, specifically suspensions and diatonic/chromatic neighbors. The very first note sounded in the piece (pickup to m. 1, see Example 3) introduces a 9-8 suspension on b minor-6. The second 16<sup>th</sup> note in the left hand is a chromatic leading tone, an A# that resolves immediately to B (7-8). This moment reminds me of the introduction to Schubert's "Der Leiermann" — a brief chromatic moment in the left hand that expresses a "reality effect" through the starting-up of the hurdy-gurdy. Similarly, Schumann may be evoking a "reality effect" of the narrator's incompleteness, or the struggle within his situation.

Example 3. Robert Schumann, "Im wunderschönen Monat Mai," m. 1-4, Non-chord tones.

Schumann leads into m. 2 with a descending motive in the right hand on G#-F#-E#. The G# which could be heard as a non-chord tone, or a suggested harmony (g# half-diminished seventh) that is not resolved. (I will discuss this momentarily.) In m. 2, another 7-8 sounds on beat 1 in the left hand. At the end of the measure, diatonic neighbor tones resolve to a C#. This C# is then carried over the bar line to become another 9-8 suspension in b. The pattern repeats.

To me, this introductory pattern, which is repeated as an interlude (m. 12-15) and a postlude (m. 23-26), expresses Heine's images of both the bursting flowers and the singing birds. The upward arpeggiation of the left hand represents the flowers opening, while the right hand suspension followed by the descending 3-note figure at the end of the bar represents a birdcall. The non-chord tones in both parts evoke the yearning of the narrator that is expressed through these images. (These are "emo" flowers and birds.) These accompanimental expressions are pivotal moments that not only evoke the images themselves, but in Schumann's mind, how these images represent love's absence. The flowers' and birds' presence remind the narrator of what he does not have. Schumann achieves this compositionally through both tonal ambiguity and the suggestion of latent harmonies that are never able to sound.

In the first four bars of the piece, the listener hears two chords repeated in a 2+2 phrase structure: b minor in first inversion followed by C# Major dominant seventh. Through this progression, Schumann creates certain harmonic expectations that intentionally confuse the listener. First, the G# at the end of m. 1 that sounds over the b minor chord suddenly suggests a g# half-diminished seventh

chord that one might expect to resolve to A Major (see Example 3). Given the key signature of the piece, this seems quite possible. However, Schumann doesn't go there. Rather, the G# foreshadows the fifth scale degree of C# Major-7. The C#7 chord then suggests an eventual resolution to f# minor. Schumann doesn't go there either. Instead, he shifts back to b minor, and the pattern repeats. At this moment, it is not clear whether Schumann wishes the listener to hear the piece is A Major or f# minor. The ambiguity evokes the narrator's inner turmoil. The repetition suggests the incessant remembering of his love's absence.

At the beginning of both the first and second verses, Schumann does resolve to A Major (m. 6 and m. 17) as the narrator sings the introductory remark, "In the wonderfully beautiful month of May." It is the first cadential moment in the piece. I think this shift in modality to A Major represents both the beauty of May as well as a time when the narrator was happy. However, even this A Major is obtruded by a 4-3 suspension in an inner voice (see Example 4). While on the surface the narrator was happy at this moment, underneath this memory his angst remains. The 4-3 suspension also suggests that perhaps A Major is not the piece's tonal center, as there is never a moment where we fully resolve there. In fact, Schumann avoids resolution with a 4-3-5 movement that results in an open 5<sup>th</sup> on beat 2 of the measure (see Example 4).



Example 4. Robert Schumann, "Im wunderschönen Monat Mai," m. 5-6.

The clearest indicator to me that the piece is in f# minor — a sonority that never sounds, by the way — are the consistent C#7 chords that frame the work. The most telling of these moments is the final measure (m. 26), for which Schumann places the final fermata on the seventh scale degree of C# Major (see Example 5). The seventh scale degree lingers on and further pronounces the narrator's longing to "resolve." It is through the strong suggestion of f# minor but ultimately its absence from the piece that Schumann expresses the absence of the narrator's love.



Example 5. Robert Schumann, "Im wunderschönen Monat Mai," m. 25-26.



While I have now established that the piece is in *f#* minor, Schumann also explores tonicizations in other key areas for his setting of the second half of each quatrain. (For simplicity, I will refer to Verse 1 measure numbers, knowing that these moments are also applicable for Verse 2). After the almost-resolution to A Major in m. 5-8, Schumann suddenly shifts to a tonicization of *b* minor followed by a tonicization in D Major (see Example 6). These cadential patterns actually echo the introduction — *iv-V7* movement in the respective key area — and provide further clarity that ultimately the piece is in *f#* minor (an implication-realization moment!). The difference between these cadences and the introduction is that Schumann actually allows these cadences to resolve. To me, the sequence of tonal areas explored through the verses — A Major to *b* minor to D Major — suggests an expressive tonality. The rise of the key areas creates a sense of anticipation that echoes the text’s sentiment: “Then it was in my heart (that) love rose up.”

<b>Prelude (m. 1-4)</b>			
m. 1	m. 2	m. 3	m. 4
b6	C#7	b6	C#7
<i>f#</i> : iv	V7	iv	V7
2		2	

  

<b>Verse 1 (m. 5-12) &amp; Verse 2 (m. 16-23)</b>							
m. 5	m. 6	m. 7	m. 8	m. 9	m. 10	m. 11	m. 12
m. 16	m. 17	m. 18	m. 19	m. 20	m. 21	m. 22	m. 23
b6 – E7	A	b6 – E7	A	e6 – F#7	b	g – A7	D -- b
<i>f#</i> : iv6 - V7/III	III	<b>A</b> : ii6-V7	I	<b>b</b> : iv-V7	i	<b>D</b> : iv-V7	I – vi
<b>A</b> : ii6-V7	I						
4 (2+2)				4 (2+2)			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Differences between Verses 1 &amp; 2: Longer <i>crescendo</i> in m. 22 (compare with m. 11)</li> </ul>							

**Interlude (m. 12-15) & Postlude (m. 23-26)**

m. 12	m. 13	m. 14	m. 15
m. 23	m. 24	m. 25	m. 26
D - b	C#7	b	C#7
f#: VI - iv	V	iv	V
2		2	

- Differences between Interlude & Postlude: *ritardando* in m. 24, fermatas in m. 26

**Example 6. Robert Schumann, “Im wunderschönen Monat Mai,”  
Harmonic, Roman Numeral, and Phrase Analysis.**

Throughout these rising tonicizations, I find Schumann’s setting of the b minor chord in m. 10 fascinating (see Example 7). Not only does it include chromatic movement in the arpeggiation with #4-5 followed 7-8, but the upper g natural at the end of the measure strikes the ear as unusual after the established G#’s over a b minor chord in the introduction. Schumann is using the g natural to foreshadow the g minor in first inversion to follow. But Schumann also uses the g natural to contrast the stepwise ascent to g# in m. 12. The g natural makes the g# that follows more significant, and brings out the return to musical material to further emphasize the music’s circularity. This circularity is further emphasized by Schumann’s exact reiteration of the music from Verse 1 to Verse 2 (see Example 6).

**Example 7. Robert Schumann, “Im wunderschönen Monat Mai,” m. 9-12.**

The repeat of music for both verses of poetry seems natural given the parallel structure of the poem. My question then becomes, does Schumann acknowledge the difference in subject matter between the two verses? Does he express the shift from inward to outward that the narrator naturally portrays? The answer is yes, but in a way that would be barely recognizable unless the singer emphasized it. The single difference I could find between the two verses is in the length of the crescendo in m. 11 versus the complementary music in m. 22 (compare Example 7 with Example 8). The rise of the vocal line in measures 9, 11, and 20 is accompanied by a crescendo on the second half of the measure. In contrast, Schumann writes a crescendo over the *entirety* of measure 22. I think this alternative expressive marking is pivotal. It is the only way that Schumann acknowledges the shift in expression between Heine's two quatrains. The long crescendo naturally evinces the narrator's "longing and desire." Without acknowledgement of this crescendo, Schumann truly is expressing solely a circular, fragmented depiction of the narrator's woes.

The image shows a musical score for Robert Schumann's "Im wunderschönen Monat Mai," measures 21-22. The score is in G major and 3/4 time. The vocal line is on a treble clef staff, and the piano accompaniment is on a grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The lyrics are: "hab' ich ihr ge - stan - den mein Seh - nen und Ver -". A red arrow points to a long crescendo in measure 22, which is marked with a long hairpin symbol.

**Example 8. Robert Schumann, "Im wunderschönen Monat Mai," m. 21-22.**

There is certainly a yearning that is innate in Heine's poem, and Schumann takes this yearning to another emotional level in his musical setting. While Heine's poem has a parallel structure, the subject matter portrays first an inner than an

outward perspective. While Heine's poem is repetitive, Schumann's setting, with the exception of a lone crescendo, is reiterative. Schumann sets a monotonous experience — a world in which the male suitor recounts over and over his love for and profession of love for this woman. This circular depiction is not developing somewhere; it reminds me of someone who is repeatedly hitting their head against the wall. It is reiteratively painful and depressing.

While Schumann is clearly a 19<sup>th</sup> century Romantic composer, his setting of "Im wunderschönen Monat Mai" suggests a loosening of subordinate musical principles, and a foreshadowing of bi-tonal, coordinative structures. The reiterative quality of this work sounds almost like a pre-cursor to John Adams' minimalism. The nuanced differences between Heine's poem and Schumann's setting might depict a shift in psychology that was occurring throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century; a shift that ultimately led to music's re-structuring.

## Works Cited

Meyer, Leonard. (1956) *Emotion and Meaning in Music*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.